

The Gunpowder Plot

By Bruce Robinson

The failed plot to assassinate James I and the ruling Protestant elite would, however unfairly, taint all English Catholics with treason for centuries to come. Who were the conspirators and what did they hope to achieve?



Robert Catesby, leader of the gunpowder plotters

Disillusionment

Spying and shoot-outs, treachery and torture, not to mention gruesome deaths. The Gunpowder Plot has it all. Why were Catholics so bitter, and what did they hope to achieve?

The year 1603 marked the end of an era. After 45 years on the English throne, Elizabeth I was dying. All signs suggested her successor would be James VI of Scotland, the son of Mary Queen of Scots - the queen who had been executed in 1587 on Elizabeth's orders.

English Catholics were very excited. They had suffered severe persecution since 1570, when the Pope had excommunicated Elizabeth, releasing her subjects from their allegiance to her. The Spanish Armada of 1588 had made matters worse. To the Tudor State, all Catholics were potential traitors. They were forbidden to hear Mass, forced instead to attend Anglican services, with steep fines for those recusants who persistently refused.

Yet rumours suggested James was more warmly disposed to Catholics than the dying Queen Elizabeth. His wife, Queen Anne of Denmark, was a Catholic, and James himself was making sympathetic noises. The crypto-Catholic Earl of Northumberland sent one of his staff, Thomas Percy, to act as his agent in Scotland. Percy's reports back optimistically suggested that Catholics might enjoy protection in James' England.

The early signs were encouraging. Upon his accession as James I of England (VI of Scotland), the new king ended recusancy fines and awarded important posts to the Earl of Northumberland and Henry Howard, another Catholic sympathiser. This relaxation led to considerable growth in the number of visible Catholics.

Trying to juggle different religious demands, James was displeased at their increasing strength. The discovery in July 1603 of two small Catholic plots did not help. Although most Catholics were horrified, all were tainted by the threat of treason.

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The situation deteriorated further at the Hampton Court Conference of January 1604. Trying to accommodate as many views as possible, James I expressed hostility against the Catholics in order to

satisfy the Puritans, whose demands he could not wholly satisfy. In February he publicly announced his 'utter detestation' of Catholicism; within days all priests and Jesuits had been expelled and recusancy fines reintroduced.

Although bitterly disappointed, most English Catholics prepared to swallow the imposition of the fines, and live their double lives as best they could. But this passive approach did not suit all.

Robert Catesby was a devout Catholic and familiar with the price of faith. His father had been imprisoned for harbouring a priest, and he himself had had to leave university without a degree, to avoid taking the Protestant Oath of Supremacy. Yet he possessed immense personal magnetism, crucial in recruiting and leading his small band of conspirators.

The plotters



The lower ground floor vault of the House of Lords where the gunpowder was stored

Their first meeting was on 20 May 1604. Catesby was joined by his friends Thomas Wintour, Jack Wright and Thomas Percy at the Duck and Drake, in the Strand. The fifth person was Guy Fawkes. Originally from York, he had been recruited in Flanders, where he had been serving in the Spanish Army. They discussed their plan to blow up Parliament House, and shortly afterwards leased a small house in the heart of Westminster, installing Fawkes as caretaker, under the alias of John Johnson.

With Parliament successively postponed to 5 November 1605, over the following year the number of plotters gradually increased to ten. Robert Keyes, Robert Wintour, John Grant and Kit Wright were all relatives, by blood or marriage, to one or more of the original five conspirators. As one of Catesby's servants, Thomas Bates' loyalty was equally firm.

'Fawkes was to light the fuse and escape to continental Europe.'

In March 1605 the group took out a lease on a ground-floor cellar close by the house they had rented from John Whynniard. The cellar lay directly underneath the House of Lords, and over the following months 36 barrels of gunpowder were moved in, enough to blow everything and everyone in the vicinity sky high, if ignited.

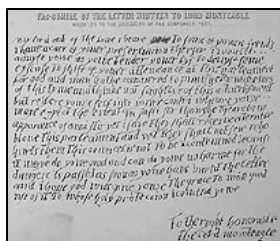
Still hoping for foreign support, Fawkes travelled back to Flanders. Unsuccessful, he was also spotted by English spies. They reported back to Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, James' first minister, and made the link between Fawkes and Catesby.

Over the next two months Catesby recruited Ambrose Rookwood, as well as Francis Tresham and Sir Everard Digby. Both Rookwood and Digby were wealthy and owned large numbers of horses, essential for the planned uprising. Tresham was Catesby's cousin through marriage, and was brother-in-law to two Catholic peers, Lords Stourton and Monteagle.

Back in London in October, with only weeks to go, the final details were planned. Fawkes was to light the fuse and escape to continental Europe. To coincide with the explosion, Digby would lead a rising in the Midlands and kidnap King James's daughter, Princess Elizabeth, ready to install her as a puppet queen. In Europe, Fawkes would be arguing the plotters' case to continental governments, to secure their passive

acceptance, even support.

Discovery



Copy of the
'anonymous' letter
delivered to Lord
Monteagle

Everything seemed ready. But on the night of 26 October, an anonymous letter was delivered to Lord Monteagle, warning him to avoid the opening of Parliament. He took the letter - generally thought to have come from Tresham - to Salisbury, who decided the best results would be achieved by striking at the last minute.

Thomas Ward, one of Monteagle's servants, had warned the plotters of the letter. Undaunted, they returned to London, and on 4 November Percy visited his patron, Northumberland, to sniff out any potential danger. Smelling nothing, they pressed on with the plan, and Catesby, Wright and Bates set off for the Midlands. All seemed well.

It wasn't. The waiting over, Salisbury ordered Westminster to be searched. The first search spotted a suspiciously large amount of firewood in a certain cellar. The second, at around midnight, found Fawkes. Immediately arrested, he gave only his alias, but Percy's name had already been linked with the cellar and house, and a warrant for his arrest was immediately issued.

The plotters escaped from London for the Midlands. Rookwood was the fastest, covering 30 miles in two hours on a single horse, a considerable achievement that enabled him to catch up with, and warn, his co-conspirators.

'...his silence had prompted James I to give permission to use torture, gradually 'proceeding to the worst'.'

These six plotters - Catesby, Rookwood, the Wright brothers, Percy and Bates - rode on towards Warwickshire. As the first bonfires of thanksgiving for the discovery of the plot were being lit in London, 'John Johnson' was being interrogated.

By 6 November his silence had prompted James I to give permission to use torture, gradually 'proceeding to the worst'. Even this, however, failed to extract any useful information for two more days.

In the Midlands, the plotters raided Warwick Castle. By now they were wanted men and, with their stolen horses, they rode to Holbeche House in Staffordshire, which they thought would be more easily defended. On arrival, they discovered that their gunpowder was soaked, and laid it in front of the fire to dry. They should have known better: the ensuing explosion blinded John Grant, rendering him useless for the inevitable confrontation.

This came quickly, in the form of 200 men led by Sir Richard Walsh, the High Sheriff of Worcestershire. They arrived at Holbeche House in the morning of 8 November. The battle was short. Catesby, the Wrights and Percy died from their wounds; Thomas Wintour, Rookwood and Grant were captured. Five others remained at large.

High treason



Guy Fawkes being interrogated
by King James VI of Scotland
and I of England

Not for long, however. By December, only Robert Wintour was still free. Furthermore, under interrogation Bates had admitted confessing the details of the plot to the Jesuit priest Father Tesimond. With the Jesuits now implicated in the 'Powder Treason', the government set about finding them, ransacking scores of Catholic homes in the process.

To further capitalise on the widespread sense of shock, the 'King's Book' - containing James's own account of what had happened, as well as the confessions of Fawkes and Thomas Wintour - was rushed through, appearing in late November.

Francis Tresham died of illness in the Tower in December, and Robert Wintour was captured in the New Year. On 27 January 1606 the trials began. Westminster Hall was crowded as spectators listened to Sir Edward Coke's speech. Under instructions from Salisbury, the Attorney General lay principal responsibility on the Jesuits, before describing the traditional punishment for traitors: hanging, drawing and quartering. They would be hanged until half-dead, upon which their genitals would be cut off and burned in front of them. Still alive, their bowels and heart would be removed. Finally they would be decapitated and dismembered; their body parts would be publicly displayed, eaten by the birds as they decomposed.

'...before describing the traditional punishment for traitors: hanging, drawing and quartering.'

Only Digby pleaded guilty, and his trial followed that of the other seven. All were found guilty of high treason. Digby, Robert Wintour, Bates and Grant were executed on 30 January, with Thomas Wintour, Rookwood, Keyes and Fawkes dying the next day.

Yet the repercussions rumbled on. Some small fry were tortured in the Tower and, tainted by Percy, the Earl of Northumberland was imprisoned there until 1621. However, Monteagle's letter - now kept in the Public Records Office - rewarded him with an annuity of around £700 per year.

It was ordinary Catholics, however, who suffered the longest as a result of the Gunpowder Plot. New laws were passed preventing them from practising law, serving as officers in the Army or Navy, or voting in local or Parliamentary elections. Furthermore, as a community they would be blackened for the rest of the century, blamed for the Great Fire of London and unfairly fingered in the Popish Plot of 1678. Thirteen plotters certainly proved an unlucky number for British Catholics: stigmatised for centuries, it was not until 1829 that they were again allowed to vote.

Find out more

Books

Guy Fawkes: The Real Story of the Gunpowder Plot? by Fr Francis Edwards, SJ (1969)

The Gunpowder Plot by Antonia Fraser (1996)

English Reformations by Christopher Haigh (1993)

Investigating the Gunpowder Plot by Mark Nicholls (1991)

Related Links

Articles

- What if the Gunpowder Plot Had Succeeded? - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/gunpowder_hutton_01.shtml
- A New Palace of Westminster - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/lj/churchlj/palace_01.shtml
- The Enduring Memory of the Gunpowder Plot - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/gunpowder_haynes_01.shtml
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- The Jacobite Cause - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/scotland_jacobites_01.shtml

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- Palace of Westminster Activity - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/lj/churchlj/parl_entry.shtml
- The Gunpowder Plot - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/launch_gms_gunpowder_plot.shtml
- Kings and Queens Through Time - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/launch_tl_kings_queens.shtml

Historic Figures

- James I - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/james_i_king.shtml
- Elizabeth I - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/elizabeth_i_queen.shtml
- Queen Anne - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/anne_queen.shtml

Timelines

- British Timeline - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/launch_tl_british.shtml

BBC Links

- BBC Coventry: Guy Fawkes and the Warwickshire Plotters - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/coventry/features/stories/2002/11/gunpowder-plotters-of-warwickshire.shtml>
- BBC Radio 4: This Sceptred Isle - A Damp Squib - http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/sceptred_isle/page/57.shtml?question=57

External Web Links

- The Gunpowder Plot Society - <http://www.gunpowder-plot.org/gun-plot.htm>
- The Gunpowder Plot: Parliament and Treason 1605 - <http://www.gunpowderplot.parliament.uk>
- The Guy Fawkes Gunpowder Plot Pages - <http://www.bcpl.net/~cbladey/guy/html/main1.html>
- The House of Commons: The Gunpowder Plot - http://www.parliament.uk/faq/gunpowder_plot.cfm#gun1

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/gunpowder_robinson_01.shtml

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